



US009469474B2

(12) **United States Patent**
Austin et al.

(10) **Patent No.:** **US 9,469,474 B2**
(45) **Date of Patent:** ***Oct. 18, 2016**

(54) **DEPLOYABLE AND DISPOSABLE
CONTAINER ASSEMBLIES WITH
BENDABLE SUPPORT MEMBERS**

(71) Applicant: **Evergreen Innovation Partners I, LP**,
Englewood, CO (US)

(72) Inventors: **Ed Austin**, Mountain View, CA (US);
William J. Ritter, Bozeman, MT (US);
Martin Albini, Bozeman, MT (US)

(73) Assignee: **Evergreen Innovation Partners I, LP**,
Englewood, CO (US)

(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this
patent is extended or adjusted under 35
U.S.C. 154(b) by 405 days.

This patent is subject to a terminal dis-
claimer.

(21) Appl. No.: **14/042,506**

(22) Filed: **Sep. 30, 2013**

(65) **Prior Publication Data**

US 2014/0131351 A1 May 15, 2014

Related U.S. Application Data

(63) Continuation of application No. 13/077,741, filed on
Mar. 31, 2011, now Pat. No. 8,556,100, which is a
continuation of application No. 11/412,628, filed on
Apr. 26, 2006, now Pat. No. 8,070,006.

(51) **Int. Cl.**
A45C 7/00 (2006.01)
B65F 1/00 (2006.01)
B65F 1/14 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**
CPC **B65F 1/0073** (2013.01); **B65F 1/004**
(2013.01); **B65F 1/1468** (2013.01);
(Continued)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
CPC B65F 1/0073; B65F 1/004; B65F 1/1468;
B65F 1/1607; B65F 1/1615; B65D 7/24;
B65D 11/18

See application file for complete search history.

(56) **References Cited**

U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS

131,303 A 9/1872 Sabin
325,751 A 9/1885 Lawson

(Continued)

FOREIGN PATENT DOCUMENTS

WO WO-03101853 12/2003

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

International Search Report and Written Opinion for PCT/US2007/
067425; Applicant: Evergreen Innovation Partners I, LP; Date of
Mailing: Sep. 10, 2008, 13 pages.

(Continued)

Primary Examiner — Anthony Stashick

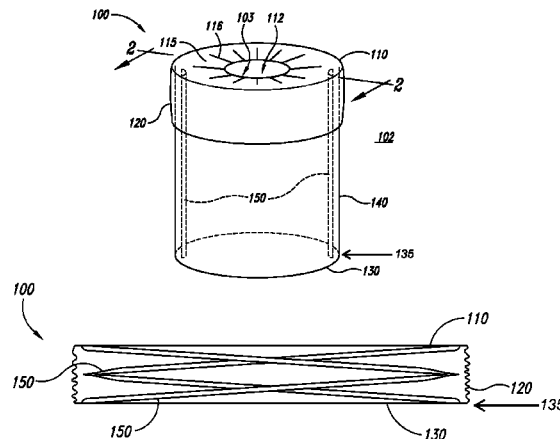
Assistant Examiner — James Way

(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm* — Perkins Coie LLP

(57) **ABSTRACT**

Collapsible containers and associated methods are disclosed herein. Certain aspects of the invention are directed toward a collapsible container assembly that includes a foldable support member that has a length and a width. The support member has a concave cross-section that causes the support member to resist bending until a threshold force is exceeded. The support member has a folded position and an extended position where the support member is unfolded. The assembly further includes at least one surface member carried by the support member. The assembly has a deployed position where the support member is in the extended position and the at least one surface member forms an enclosure with an interior. The assembly also has a collapsed position where the support member is in the folded position. The container assembly has less exterior volume in the collapsed position than in the deployed position.

16 Claims, 14 Drawing Sheets



(52) U.S. CL.

CPC *B65F 1/1607* (2013.01); *B65F 1/1615*
 (2013.01); *B65F 2001/0086* (2013.01); *B65F*
2210/1126 (2013.01); *B65F 2210/1128*
 (2013.01); *B65F 2220/106* (2013.01); *B65F*
2220/1063 (2013.01); *B65F 2230/00*
 (2013.09); *B65F 2250/00* (2013.09)

(56)

References Cited

U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS

400,588 A	4/1889	Meyering	5,845,804 A	12/1998	Prescott
651,773 A	6/1900	Smith	5,857,217 A	1/1999	Hsueh
1,052,379 A	2/1913	Ranken	5,857,722 A	1/1999	Ayotte
1,181,829 A	5/1916	Bower	5,960,983 A	10/1999	Chan
1,283,152 A	10/1918	Robinson et al.	5,964,533 A	10/1999	Ziglar
1,378,050 A	5/1921	Morris	5,975,101 A	11/1999	Zheng
1,533,636 A	6/1924	Day	6,006,772 A	12/1999	Zheng
1,647,679 A	4/1925	Williams	6,015,119 A	1/2000	Starchevich
1,583,083 A	5/1926	Macaraig	6,019,244 A	2/2000	Jones
1,906,174 A	4/1933	Miller	D422,390 S	4/2000	Chipman
2,150,620 A	3/1939	Frost	6,053,459 A	4/2000	Priefert et al.
2,405,627 A	8/1946	Williams	6,089,394 A	7/2000	Ziglar
2,553,728 A	5/1951	Skreberg	6,102,569 A	8/2000	Wang
2,791,367 A	5/1957	Mefford	6,109,282 A	8/2000	Yoon
2,795,259 A	6/1957	Nash	6,109,786 A	8/2000	Hafer et al.
2,845,976 A	8/1958	Miller	6,112,930 A	9/2000	McAtarian
3,014,516 A	12/1961	Mueller	6,113,270 A	9/2000	Hafer
3,107,712 A	10/1963	Bergeretto	6,129,051 A	10/2000	Jessie et al.
3,386,128 A	6/1968	Vyvyan	6,149,025 A	11/2000	Wang
3,474,488 A	10/1969	Kruzich	D434,890 S	12/2000	Cooper
3,507,485 A	4/1970	Bright	6,155,281 A	12/2000	Zheng
3,658,282 A	4/1972	Safford	6,155,521 A	12/2000	O'Hanlon
3,670,358 A	6/1972	Schwartz et al.	6,212,792 B1	4/2001	Bier
3,739,538 A	6/1973	Rubin	6,217,975 B1	4/2001	Daton-Lovett
3,771,752 A	11/1973	Meeh	6,244,399 B1	6/2001	Birkestrand
3,905,406 A	9/1975	Cruse	6,287,003 B1	9/2001	Hafer
3,935,615 A	2/1976	Wakeman	6,293,505 B1	9/2001	Fan
4,157,801 A	6/1979	Elmer	6,309,076 B1	10/2001	McVicker
4,248,364 A	2/1981	Anderson	6,315,143 B1	11/2001	Dotts
4,482,116 A	11/1984	Vadnais	6,321,503 B1	11/2001	Warren
4,599,832 A	7/1986	Benton et al.	6,334,235 B2	1/2002	Duperray et al.
4,646,802 A	3/1987	Basore et al.	6,343,442 B1	2/2002	Marks
4,664,348 A	5/1987	Corsaut, III et al.	6,374,565 B1	4/2002	Warren
4,706,914 A	11/1987	Ground	6,375,385 B1	4/2002	Kennedy
4,739,880 A	4/1988	Sawyer et al.	6,416,222 B2	7/2002	Hafer
4,759,518 A	7/1988	Yardas	6,425,494 B1	7/2002	Woods, II
4,846,427 A	7/1989	Jones	6,446,919 B1	9/2002	Tsui
4,887,397 A	12/1989	Peterson	6,481,591 B2	11/2002	Mendoza et al.
5,022,767 A	6/1991	Cardulla	6,484,897 B1	11/2002	Crawley
5,033,232 A	7/1991	Vaughn	6,491,434 B2	12/2002	Hafer
5,058,839 A	10/1991	Stevens	6,520,365 B2	2/2003	Schneider
5,085,018 A	2/1992	Kitamura et al.	6,543,732 B1	4/2003	Yuan
5,101,996 A	4/1992	Mosley	6,558,037 B2	5/2003	Gonella
5,106,041 A	4/1992	Jelincic	6,585,414 B2	7/2003	Peska
5,149,028 A	9/1992	Blackaby et al.	6,616,004 B1	9/2003	Erickson et al.
5,176,452 A	1/1993	Stern	6,669,045 B2	12/2003	Wang
5,197,580 A	3/1993	Berman et al.	6,676,092 B2	1/2004	Tsai
5,253,763 A	10/1993	Kirkley et al.	6,688,516 B1	2/2004	Ussen
D347,577 S	6/1994	Dire	6,712,286 B2	3/2004	Baxter et al.
5,356,024 A	10/1994	Ho et al.	6,892,897 B2	5/2005	Stewart
5,373,942 A	12/1994	Weder	6,910,304 B2	6/2005	Warren
5,375,048 A	12/1994	Barnes	6,920,993 B2	7/2005	Sheng-Bin
5,393,023 A	2/1995	Callan	7,009,578 B2	3/2006	Nolan et al.
5,464,113 A	11/1995	Ho et al.	7,140,376 B2	11/2006	Zheng
5,507,577 A	4/1996	Fowler	7,347,019 B1	3/2008	Shaw
5,620,069 A	4/1997	Hurwitz	7,354,033 B1	4/2008	Murphey et al.
5,628,069 A	5/1997	Ebert	7,494,096 B2	2/2009	Paloian et al.
5,647,156 A	7/1997	Hull et al.	2001/0032911 A1	10/2001	Gabl
5,658,277 A	8/1997	Marshall et al.	2002/0015539 A1	2/2002	Gonella
5,671,858 A	9/1997	Hsu	2002/0030052 A1	3/2002	Joo-Tai
5,678,717 A	10/1997	Hsu	2002/0090150 A1	7/2002	Peska
5,713,510 A	2/1998	Walton	2002/0144997 A1	10/2002	Mendoza et al.
5,722,446 A	3/1998	Zheng	2003/0015528 A1	1/2003	Schneider et al.
5,738,398 A	4/1998	Miano	2003/0019180 A1	1/2003	Warren et al.
5,800,067 A	9/1998	Easter	2003/0098303 A1	5/2003	Wang
5,806,815 A	9/1998	Knutson	2003/0106895 A1	6/2003	Kalal
			2003/0147568 A1	8/2003	Edwards et al.
			2003/0182878 A1	10/2003	Warren
			2004/0155038 A1	8/2004	Smith
			2004/0232016 A1	11/2004	Dietrich
			2005/0022465 A1	2/2005	Warren et al.
			2005/0199625 A1	9/2005	Salamone
			2005/0230390 A1	10/2005	Glenn
			2005/0284866 A1	12/2005	Oakner et al.

(56)

References Cited

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS

2007/0257093 A1 11/2007 Lott
2008/0056625 A1 3/2008 Stanton et al.

European Search Report for EP Application No. 07761288.5; Applicant: Evergreen Innovation Partners I, LP; Date of Mailing: Apr. 15, 2014; 5 pages.

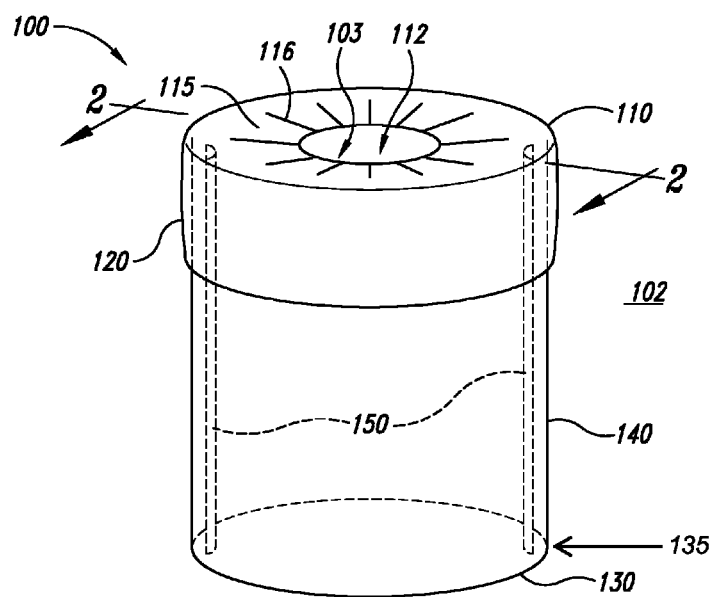


Fig. 1

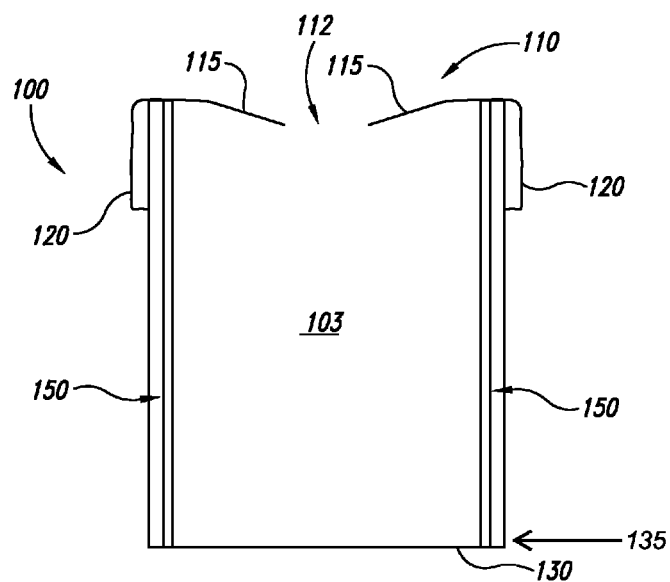


Fig. 2

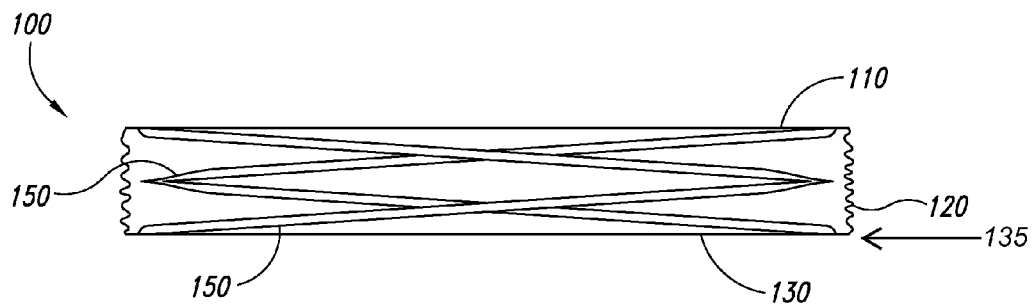


Fig. 3

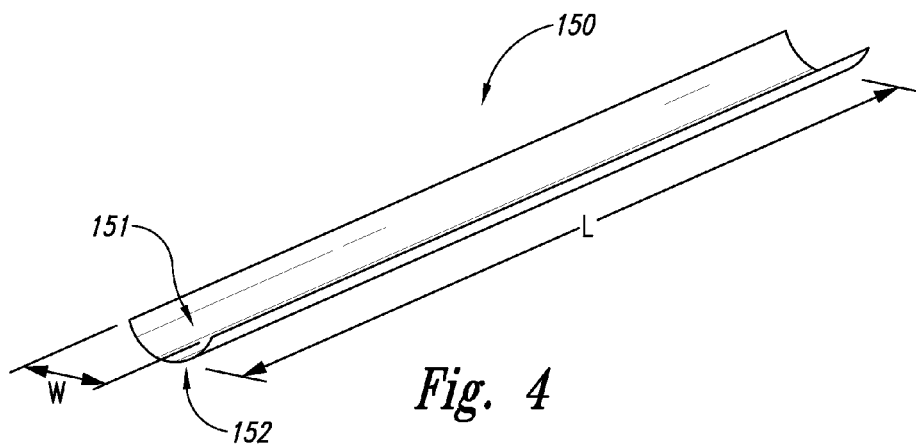


Fig. 4

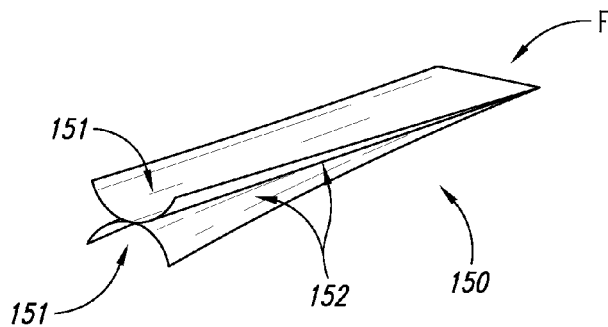


Fig. 5

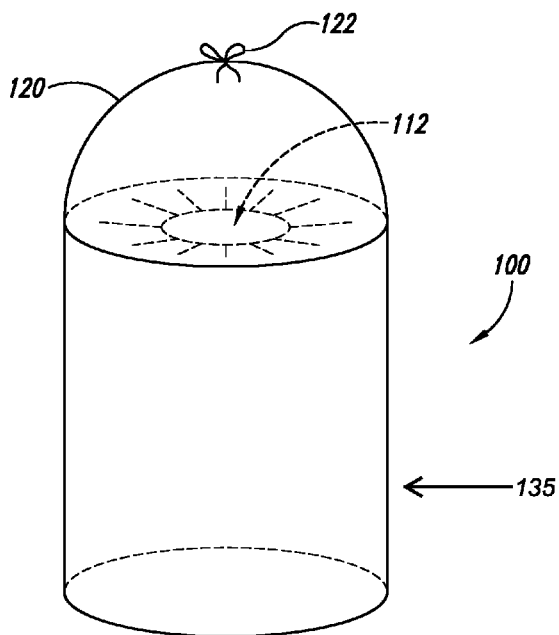


Fig. 6

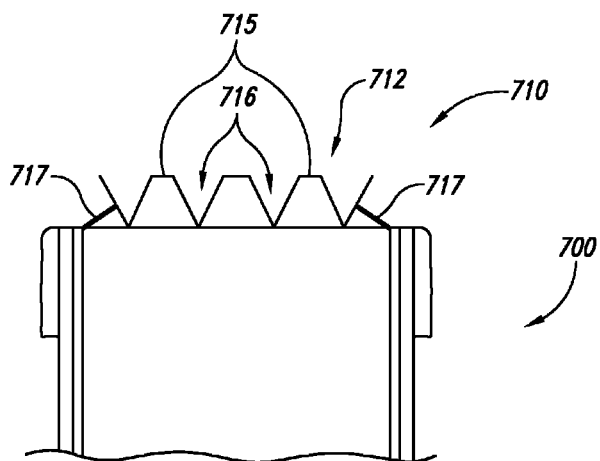


Fig. 7

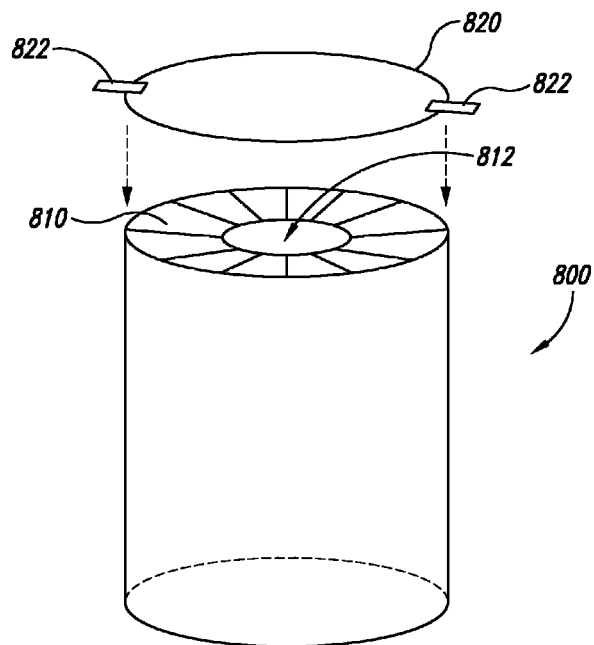


Fig. 8

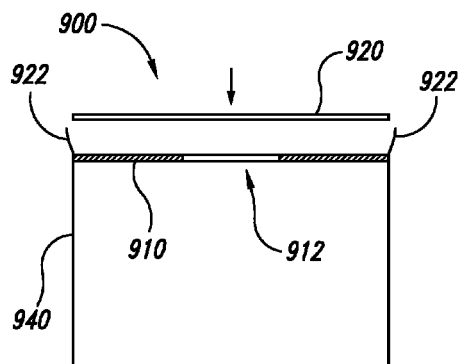


Fig. 9

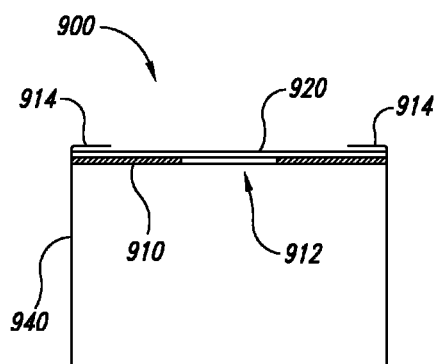


Fig. 10

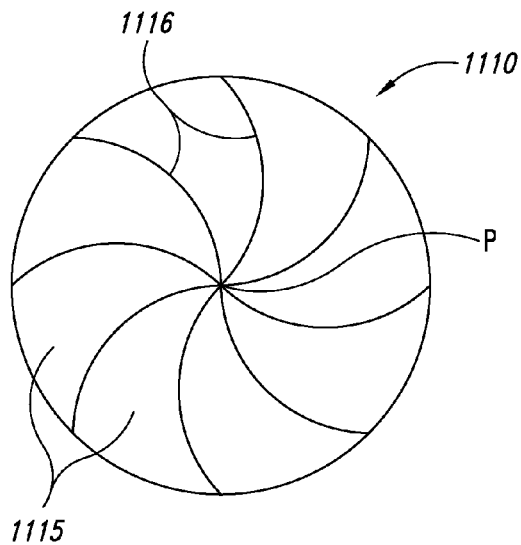


Fig. 11



Fig. 12

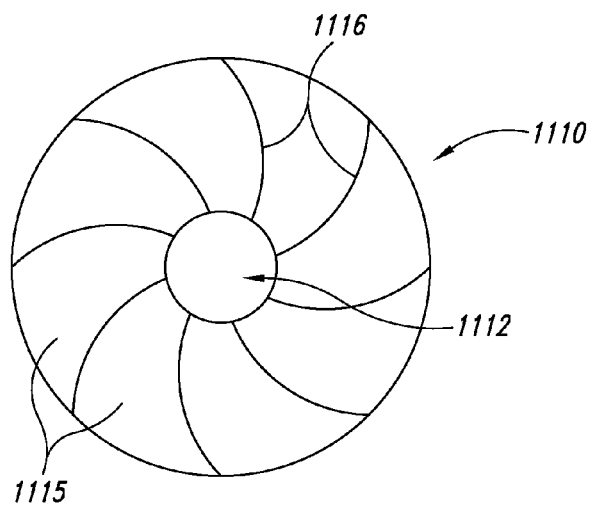


Fig. 13

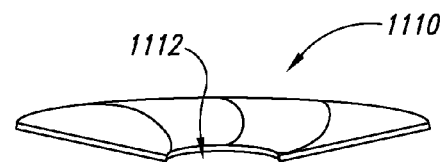


Fig. 14

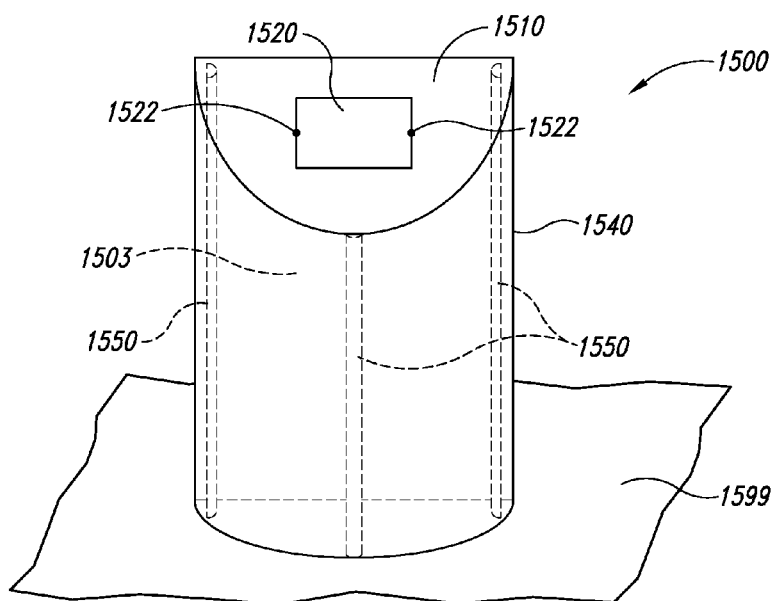


Fig. 15

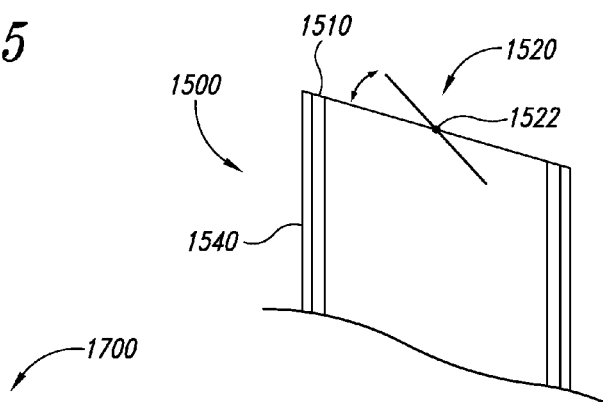


Fig. 16

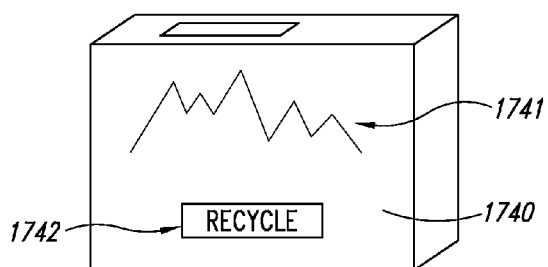


Fig. 17

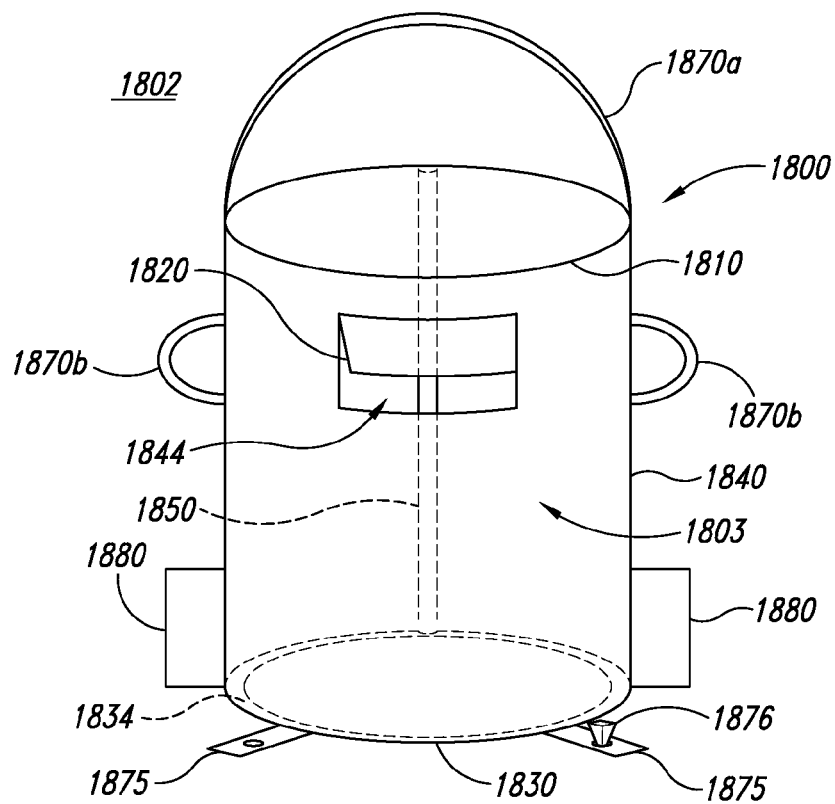


Fig. 18

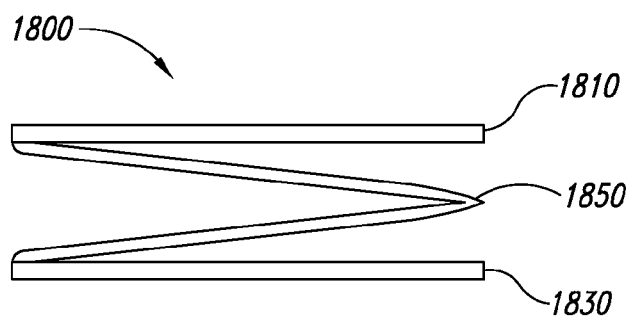


Fig. 19

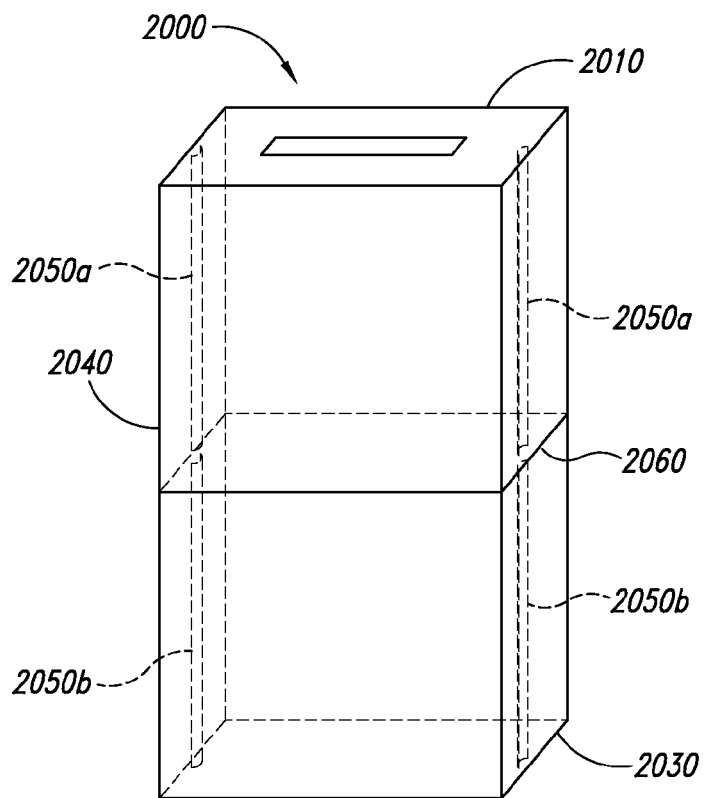


Fig. 20

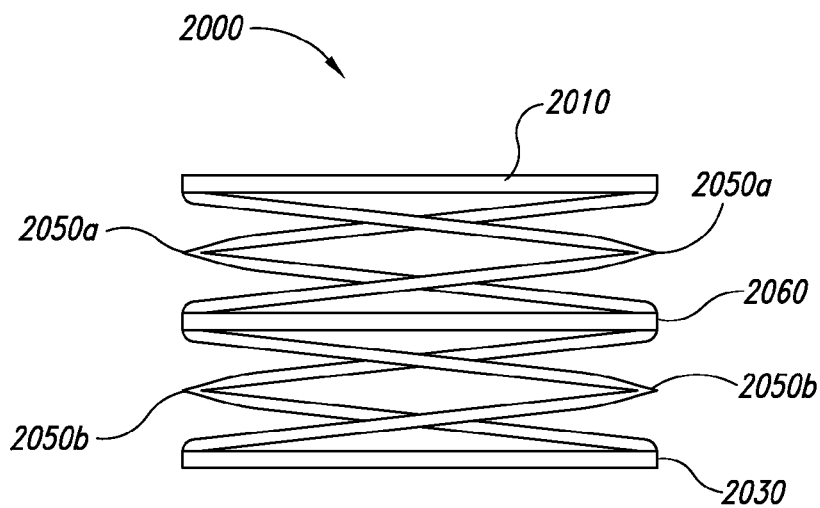


Fig. 21

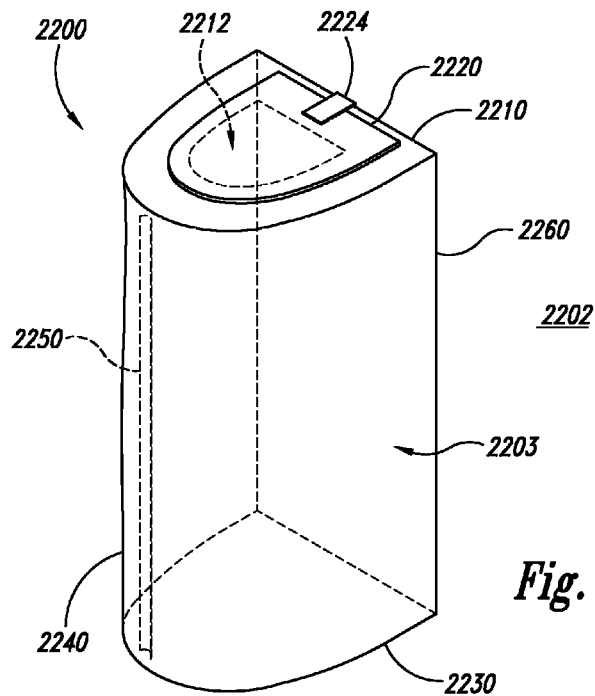


Fig. 22

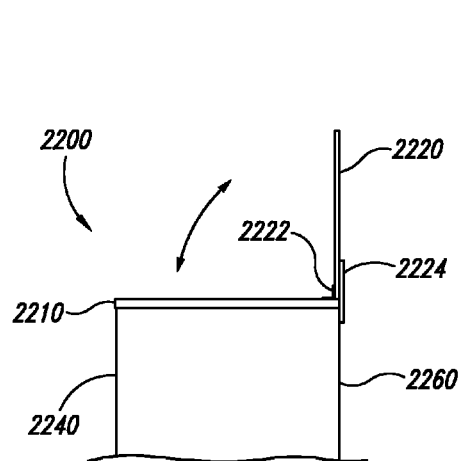


Fig. 23

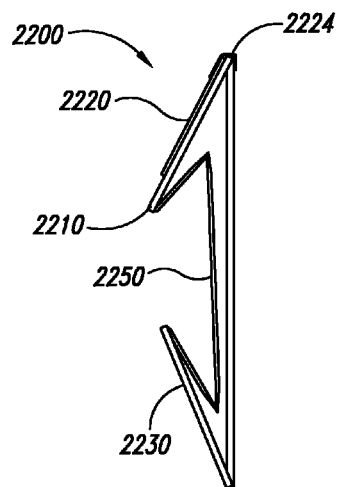


Fig. 24

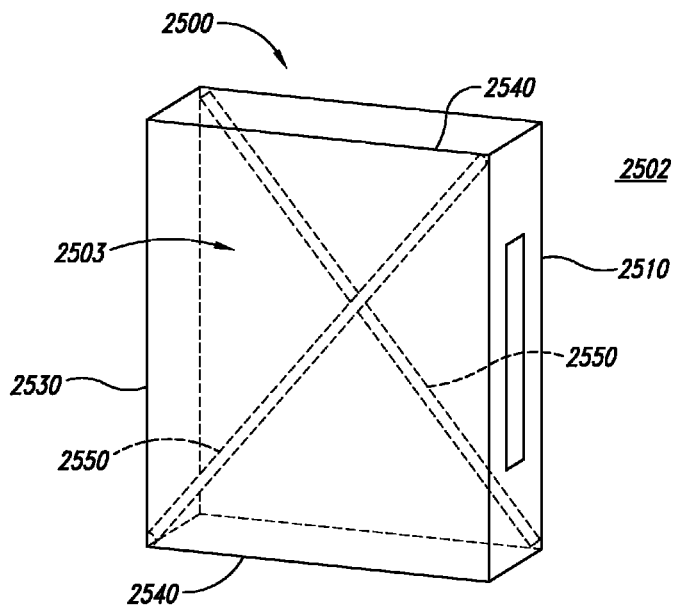


Fig. 25

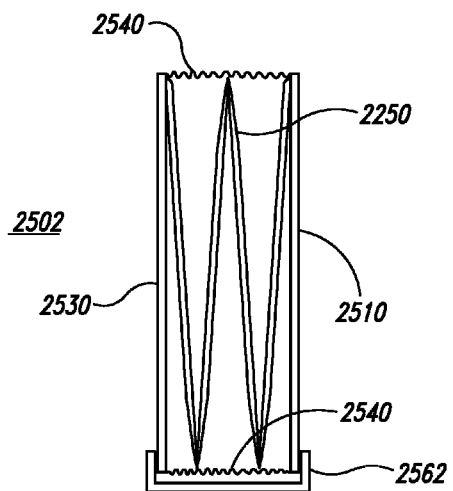


Fig. 26

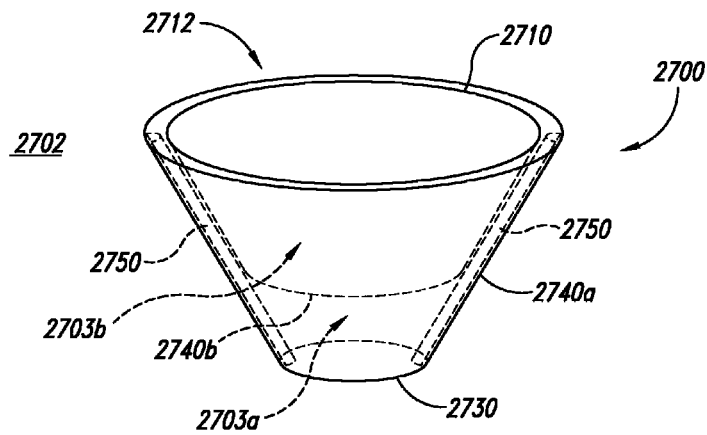


Fig. 27

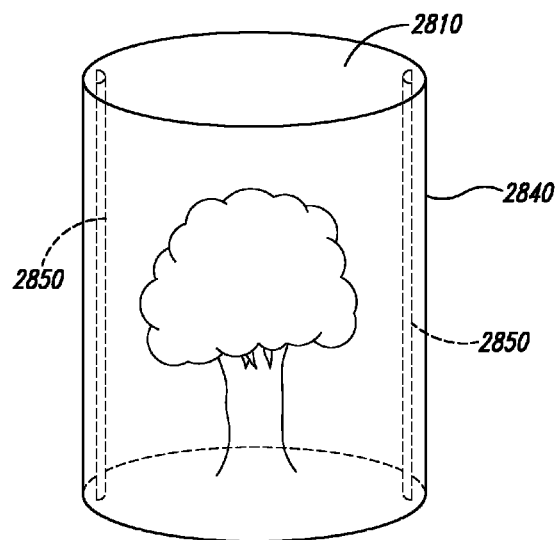


Fig. 28

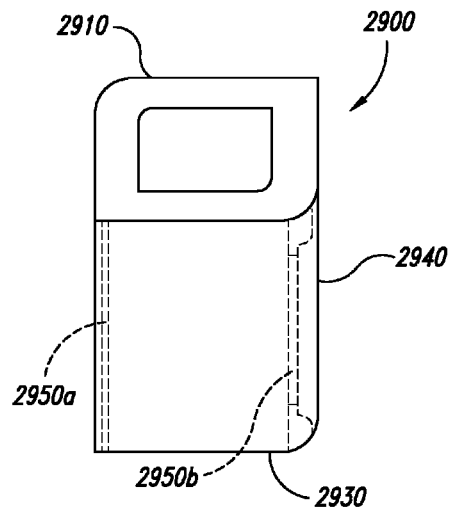


Fig. 29

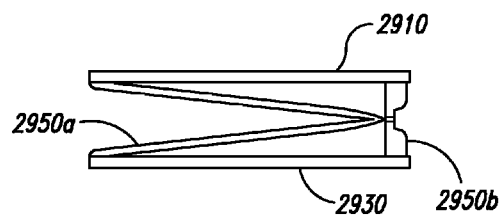


Fig. 30

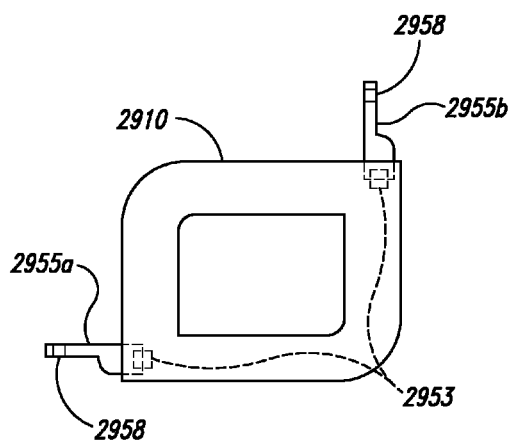


Fig. 31

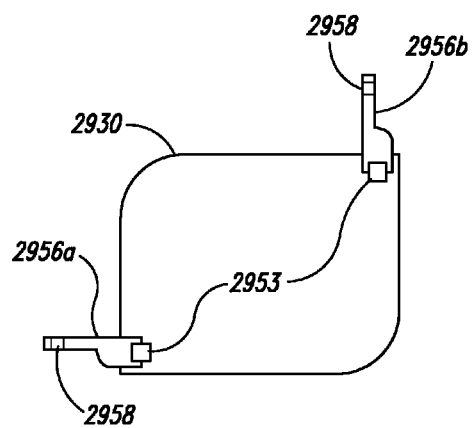


Fig. 32

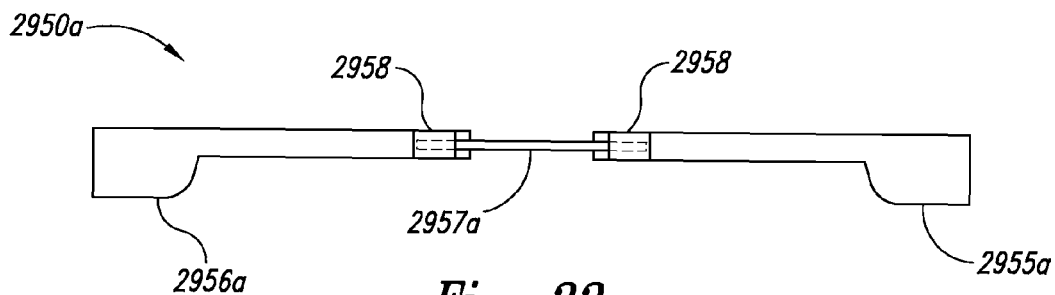


Fig. 33

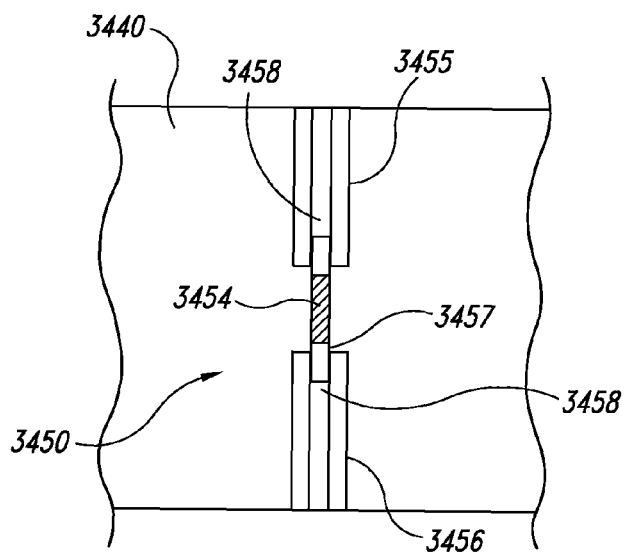


Fig. 34

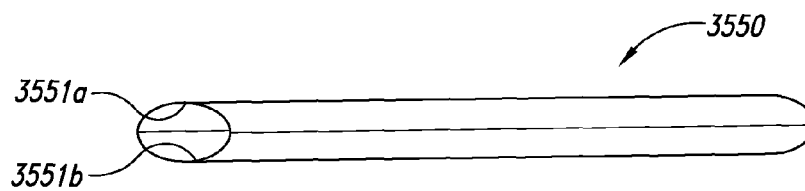


Fig. 35

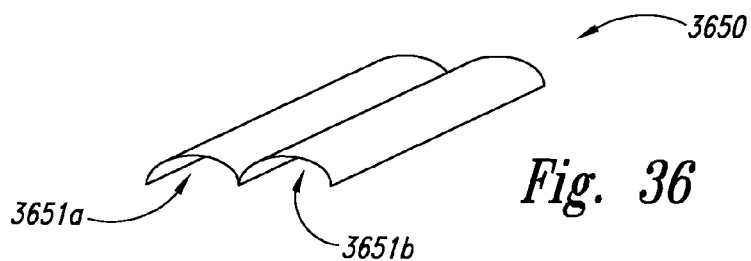


Fig. 36

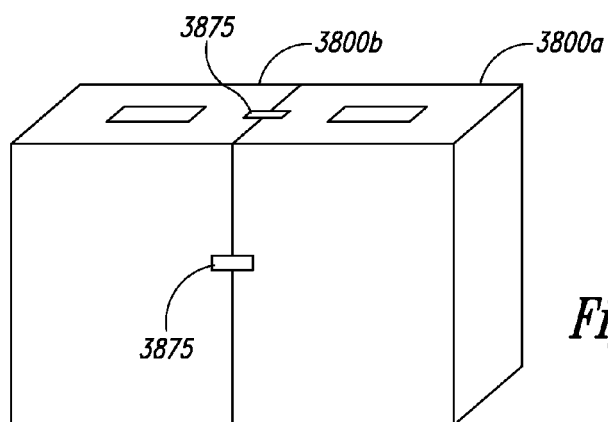
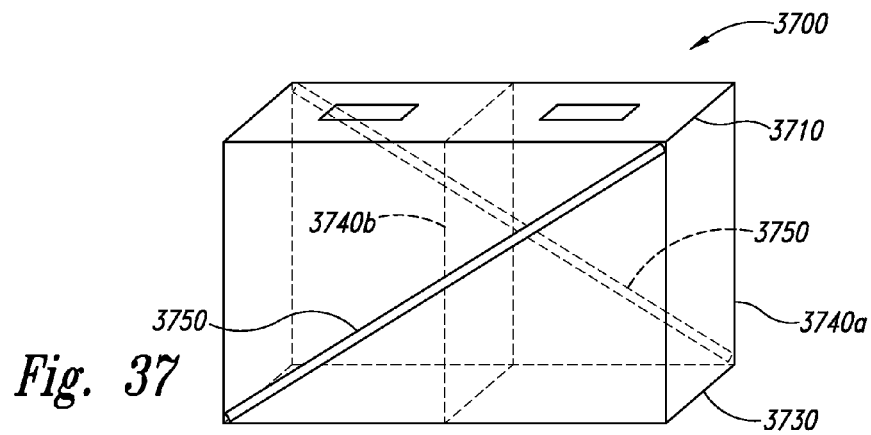
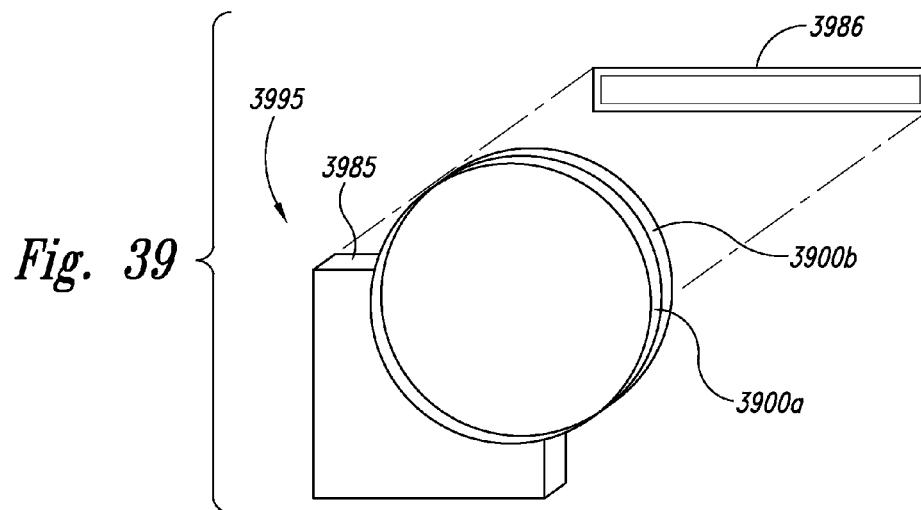


Fig. 38



1

DEPLOYABLE AND DISPOSABLE CONTAINER ASSEMBLIES WITH BENDABLE SUPPORT MEMBERS

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

The present application is a continuation patent application that claims priority to and the benefit of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 13/077,741, filed Mar. 31, 2011 titled DEPLOYABLE AND DISPOSABLE CONTAINER ASSEMBLIES AND ASSOCIATED SYSTEMS AND METHODS, and issued as U.S. Pat. No. 8,556,100 on Oct. 15, 2013 which is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/412,628, filed Apr. 26, 2006 titled DEPLOYABLE AND DISPOSABLE CONTAINER ASSEMBLIES AND ASSOCIATED SYSTEMS AND METHODS, and issued as U.S. Pat. No. 8,070,006 on Dec. 6, 2011, all of which are incorporated herein in their entireties by reference thereto.

TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention is related to deployable, disposable container assemblies and associated systems and methods.

BACKGROUND

Trash bags are commonly used to collect garbage and trash because they are convenient to use. For example, a trash bag can be used to line a trash can used in a home, office, or other facility. When the trash bag is full, the bag can be closed using a twist tie removed from the can and easily carried to a trash receptacle, such as a dumpster. Because the trash bag isolates the trash from the trash can, the trash can generally remains relatively clean for a while. The trash cans, however, typically gets dirty over time, and the process of cleaning a dirty trash can is often an unpleasant experience.

Trash bags are also convenient for use outside the home or office. For example, trash bags are often used in cars and other vehicles to collect litter and trash. Additionally, trash bags are easily carried to various outdoor locations and used for trash collection (e.g., during camping trips, picnics, or parties). Trash bags can also be used to collect trash at large events, such as those held at auditoriums, gymnasiums, stadiums and convention centers. In many cases, conventional trash bags are also used for non-trash purposes. For example, trash bags are often used to cover or hold items during storage to protect the items from the external environment.

Although trash bags are convenient for trash collection, they are flexible and unsupported so they generally require a trash can or other structure to hold the trash bag open. When a trash can or other support is not used with the trash bag, the trash bag can be very cumbersome and difficult to use and hold open. For example, a user often must hold the trash bag open with one hand while trying to deposit the trash or other item into the bags with the other hand.

Other collapsible containers have been used for a variety of temporary or long term storage purposes. For example a collapsible hamper has been used that includes a spiral coil connected to a bag-like structure. The collapsible hamper can pop up and provide a receptacle structure with an open top. The spiral coil, however, does not provide lateral or vertical stability for the hamper when in the popped up

2

position. For example, the hamper will easily collapsed or distort if a vertical and/or horizontal loads are applied to the top lip of the hamper.

SUMMARY

The present invention is directed generally toward deployable containers and associated systems and methods. One aspect of the invention is directed toward a disposable, deployable container assembly comprising a support member movable between a substantially straight, extended position and a folded position. The support member is configured to resist axial loads when in the extended position. The support member is foldable along a non-hinged portion through a range of at least 90 degrees as the support member moves from the extended position toward the folded position. The assembly has first and second end members and a collapsible sidewall connected thereto. At least one of the first end member, second end member, and sidewall is coupled to the support member.

The assembly has a deployed position where the support member is in the extended position and the first and second end members are spaced apart from each other and combine with the sidewall to form a disposable enclosure with an interior. The first end member has an opening that provides access to the interior of the enclosure when the assembly is in the deployed position. The assembly has a collapsed position where the support member is in the folded position and at least a portion of the first and second end members are adjacent to each other.

Another embodiment provides a deployable container assembly that includes a foldable support member that has a concave cross-sectional shape, the support member configured to support axial loads and resist bending across its length when the support member is in the extended position. The foldable support member has a folded position where the support member is folded across its length and an extended position where the support member is unfolded. The assembly further includes at least one surface member coupled to the support member. The assembly has a deployed position where the support member is in the extended position and the surface member forms an enclosure with an interior. The assembly also has a collapsed position where the support member is in the folded position. The container assembly has an exterior volume in the collapsed position less than its exterior volume when in the deployed position.

Another aspect of the invention is directed toward a method for making a deployable container assembly that includes providing a foldable support member. The foldable support member has a folded position wherein the support member is folded across its length and an extended position wherein the support member is unfolded. The support member has a concave cross-sectional area and is configured to support axial loads and resist bending when in the extended position. The method further includes coupling at least one surface member to the support member so that the container assembly can move between a deployed position and a collapsed position. In the deployed position the support member is in the extended position and the surface member is supported by the support member to form an enclosure with an interior. In the collapsed position the support member is in the folded position.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is an isometric view of a disposable, deployable container assembly in accordance with an embodiment of the invention shown in a deployed position.

3

FIG. 2 is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of the assembly taken substantially along line 2-2 of FIG. 1.

FIG. 3 is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of the assembly of FIG. 2 shown in a collapsed position.

FIG. 4 is an isometric illustration of a support member from the assembly of FIG. 1 shown removed from the assembly and in an extended position.

FIG. 5 is an isometric illustration of the support member of FIG. 4 in a folded position.

FIG. 6 is an isometric illustration of the assembly of FIG. 1 with a closure device covering an opening in a top member of the assembly.

FIG. 7 is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of a first surface member of a deployable container assembly in accordance with another embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 8 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly with a closure device in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIGS. 9 and 10 are partially schematic illustrations of a deployable container assembly with a closure device in accordance with embodiments of the invention.

FIGS. 11-14 are partially schematic illustrations of a top member of a deployable container assembly in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 15 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly with a slanted top member and a closure device in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 16 is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of a portion of the deployable container assembly shown in FIG. 15.

FIG. 17 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly with markings on a portion of the assembly in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 18 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly with handling devices, securing devices, and storage devices in accordance with embodiments of the invention.

FIG. 19 is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of a portion of the deployable container assembly of FIG. 18 shown in a collapsed position.

FIG. 20 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly with an auxiliary support member in accordance with another embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 21 is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of a portion of the deployable container assembly of FIG. 20 shown in a collapsed position.

FIG. 22 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly with a closure device in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 23 is a partially schematic side elevation view of a portion of the deployable container assembly of FIG. 22 with the closure device in an open position.

FIG. 24 is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of a portion of the deployable container assembly of FIG. 22 shown in a collapsed position.

FIG. 25 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly with at least one external support member in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 26 is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of a portion of the deployable container assembly of FIG. 25 shown in a collapsed position.

FIG. 27 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly with inner and outer sidewalls in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 28 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

4

FIG. 29 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly with a hinge device coupled to a support member in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 30 is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of a portion of the deployable container assembly of FIG. 29 shown in a collapsed position.

FIG. 31 is a partially schematic illustration of a surface member of the deployable container assembly of FIG. 29.

FIG. 32 is a partially schematic illustration of another surface member of the deployable container assembly of FIG. 29.

FIG. 33 is a partially schematic illustration of a support member of the deployable container assembly of FIG. 29.

FIG. 34 is a partially schematic illustration of a sidewall of a deployable container assembly with at least a portion of a support member integral to the sidewall in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 35 is an isometric illustration of a support member of a deployable container assembly in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 36 is an isometric illustration of a support member of a deployable container assembly in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 37 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly with multiple compartments in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 38 is an isometric illustration of two deployable container assemblies coupled together in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 39 is an isometric illustration of a packaged assembly that includes a packaging device with at least one deployable container assembly in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The present disclosure describes deployable container assemblies and associated systems and methods. Several specific details of the invention are set forth in the following description and in FIGS. 1-39 to provide a thorough understanding of certain embodiments of the invention. One skilled in the art, however, will understand that the present invention may have additional embodiments, and that other embodiments of the invention may be practiced without several of the specific features described below.

FIGS. 1-3 show a deployable, disposable container assembly 100 in accordance with an embodiment of the invention. The assembly 100 of at least one embodiment has a foldable support member 150 having a length and a width. The support member 150 has a folded position where the support member is folded across its length and an extended position where the support member is unfolded. A surface member 135 is coupled to the support member 150. The assembly 100 has a deployed position where the support member 150 is in the extended position and the surface member 135 forms an enclosure with an interior. The assembly 100 has a collapsed position where surface member 135 is collapsed and the support member 150 is in the folded position. The assembly 100, when deployed, is a free standing disposable container that includes one or more support members 150 coupled to sidewalls 140 that extend between spaced apart top and bottom members 110 and 130 (e.g., end members). The support members 150 extend between the top and bottom members 110 and 130. The surface member 135 is coupled to the top and bottom members 110 and 130. In one embodiment, the support members 150 carry the surface member 135 via the top and

5

bottom members **110** and **130**. The surface member **135** and at least one of the top and bottom members **110** and **130** are substantially water resistant and configured to contain liquid within the interior. In the illustrated embodiment, the support members **150** are securely connected to the top and bottom members **110** and **130** to form a frame or support structure that retains the assembly **100** in the free-standing, deployed position with the top member **110** held apart from the bottom member **130** and the sidewalls **140** extending therebetween. Accordingly, the top member **110**, the sidewalls **140** and the bottom member **130** define an interior area **103** that can contain and retain items placed into the container. In one embodiment, the assembly **100** is configured to be a free standing, disposable container assembly that receives and contains trash, recyclables, yard waste or other refuse. When the assembly has been filled or partially filled, the entire assembly and its contents can be thrown away, recycled, or otherwise disposed of quickly, cleanly and easily as a unit. The assembly **100** of the illustrated embodiment also has a closure device **120** connected to the flexible sidewalls **140** and/or to the top member **110** that allows the assembly **100** to be securely closed, thereby retaining the contents within the assembly.

The surface member **135** includes a flexible material. In the illustrated embodiment, the sidewalls **140** are flexible or semi-flexible sidewalls made from cloth, plastic, paper or other sufficiently durable material that allow the assembly **100** to move to the deployed position shown in FIG. 1 from a collapsed position shown in FIG. 3, as discussed in greater detail below. The sidewalls **140** in one embodiment are made from a material that is substantially impervious to water or other liquids. Accordingly, the assembly **100** could be used as a disposable collector of trash that may include liquids, and the liquids would be fully contained within the interior area **103**. In various embodiments, the sidewalls **140** can include multiple panels or be one continuous sheet. In one embodiment, the sidewalls **140** can be made of a puncture-resistant material. The sidewalls **140** can also be integrally connected to portions of the bottom member **130** and/or the top member **110**.

In the illustrated embodiment, the top member **110** includes an opening **112** between an exterior **102** of the assembly **100** and the interior area **103** of the assembly **100**. The opening **112** is shaped and sized so selected items can be placed into the interior area **103** through the opening in the top member **110**. The opening **112** can have anyone of a variety of shapes, and the top member **110** can include more than one opening with the same or different shapes. In one embodiment, the top member **110** is a substantially planar piece of cardboard or plastic with a hole formed therein to define the opening **112**. In another embodiment, the top member **110** is a ring, so the opening **112** is defined by the inner diameter of the ring. The top member **110** can include a plurality of flexible fingers **115** and slots **116** around the opening **112**. The fingers **115** can be positioned downwardly toward the interior area **103** so that the fingers **115** can direct items toward the interior **103** of the assembly **100**. The fingers **115** are moveable so the opening **103** can be enlarged when needed. The fingers **115** also help keep items within the interior area **103** from falling out.

In FIG. 1, the bottom member **130** provides a base or bottom portion of the assembly and does not have any openings so that the container is fully sealed except for the opening **112** in the top member **110**. In one embodiment, the bottom member **130** is made from a water impervious material so the container will not leak through the bottom if fluid is in the container's interior area **103**. In another

6

embodiment the bottom member **130** can be made with a material that allows liquid to pass therethrough, thereby intentionally allowing fluid to exit the container through the bottom member. In one embodiment, the bottom member **130** is a substantially planar piece of cardboard or plastic. In another embodiment, the bottom member **130** is a ring (e.g., circular, square, or other geometric shape) covered by a layer of material, such as plastic, paper, or other sufficiently durable materials. In another embodiment, the bottom member **130** includes two or more cross members coupled to the sidewalls. The crossmember can be in a "+" configuration, a "*" configuration, or other intersecting configuration.

In the illustrated embodiment, the top and bottom members **110** and **130** include rigid or semi-rigid materials and provide a structural support for the upper and lower portions of the assembly **100**. Accordingly, the top and bottom members **110** and **130** work with the support members **150** to provide a free-standing, disposable container when the assembly **100** is in the deployed position. In certain embodiments, the top and bottom members **110** and **130** can be made from cardboard, metal, wood, plastic, and/or coated cardboard that is water resistant. In still other embodiments, the top and/or bottom members **110** and **130** can be flexible or semi-rigid. For example, in selected embodiments the top and/or bottom members **110** and/or **130** can be made from a layer of material stretched across a support ring, frame portion, or outline.

In the embodiment illustrated in FIG. 1, the support members **150** are bendable struts that have a characteristic such that the strut tends to hold an extended position to provide structural stability to the container assembly **100** when in the deployed position. The struts are shown in their memory position in FIG. 1. If a force, such as a lateral or vertical force, above a predetermined threshold is applied, the struts can be temporarily moved to another shape (e.g., the struts can be folded in half along their length) allowing the container assembly **100** to move from the deployed position toward the collapsed position (shown in FIG. 3). In the collapsed position, struts are generally bent in one or more locations so that the top and bottom members **110** and **130** are generally adjacent to each other, and the flexible sidewalls **140** are generally folded. In the collapsed position, the assembly **100** is a compact, self-contained unit that takes up less total volume (e.g., less internal and external volume), thereby requiring less space for shipping or storage.

In the illustrated embodiment, the support members **150** are non-hinged members so they can bend at virtually any portion along their length. When the assembly **100** is released or otherwise moved from the collapsed position to the deployed position, the struts unfold and move toward a straight, extended position to the memory position, thereby holding the top and bottom members **110** and **130** apart from each other with the flexible sidewalls **140** extending therebetween. The struts can be sized so that top and bottom members **110** and **130** are held apart by a distance so that the flexible sidewalls are pulled taut and held in tension when the assembly is in the deployed position.

FIG. 4 is an isometric illustration of a support member **150** from the assembly **100** of FIG. 1 in an extended position. FIG. 5 is an isometric illustration of the support member **150** of FIG. 4 in a folded position. In FIG. 4, the support member **150** is a non-hinged, bendable member that has a generally accurate or curved profile or cross-sectional shape across its width **W**. This curved profile is a memory position of the support member **150** in that the support member tends to reestablish or seek to reestablish the curved profile when the curved profile is disturbed, such as when

7

the support member is bent. For example, the support member **150** in FIGS. **4** and **5** includes the curved profile with a concave portion **151** and a convex portion **152**. The curved profile of the support member **150** is configured to resist bending along the cross-section or width of the support member **150** because the curved profile must be disturbed (e.g., flattened) for the support member to bend, as seen in FIG. **5**. When the support member **150** is in the extended position, it provides structural support that resists bending or supports vertical loads applied to the top member **110**. Accordingly, when the container assembly is in the deployed position, it is a free standing unit that will not collapse under light to moderate vertical loads.

In the illustrated embodiment, when a bending force is applied to the support member **150** in excess of a threshold, a portion **F** of the support member can be flattened, as shown in FIG. **5**. The support member **150** can be bent or folded through various intermediate positions (e.g., similar to bending a retractable tape measure) to the folded position shown in FIG. **5**. Once the support member **150** is bent or folded, it can be retained in the bent position until a force is applied to unfold the support member **150** toward the extended position.

In one embodiment, the support member **150** is shaped and is configured to be biased toward the extended position. The support member **150** is made of a material that does not have a memory for the folded position and will be biased toward the fully extended position independent of duration and temperature while the assembly is stored in the collapsed position. Accordingly, the assembly **100** can be released or otherwise moved from the collapsed position, and the support members **150** will automatically move to the extended position, thereby fully deploying the assembly **100** to the deployed positions.

In another embodiment, the support members **150** are shaped and configured so that they will tend to remain in the folded position until they are moved to a selected intermediate position, and then the tendency for the support members **150** to return to the curved profile provide an urging force to continue unfolding the support members **150** to the extended position, thereby moving the assembly to the fully deployed position. In other embodiments, the support members' tendency to reestablish the curved profile can provide an urging force to unfold the member **150** from any folded position. In still other embodiments, the support member **150** can be manually unfolded in order to straighten the member **150** to the extended position. In other embodiments, the support member **150** can include other types of memory and/or resilient characteristics. In the illustrated embodiment, the support members **150** are made of a flexible metallic material, although other flexible and resilient materials, for example, plastic, or composites could be used.

The assembly **100** in alternate embodiments can be made from various materials and/or can have various characteristics, sizes, and shapes. For example, in selected embodiments the top and bottom members **110** and **130** and/or the sidewalls **140** can be made from a breathable material, a water resistant material, or both. In selected embodiments, at least a portion of the assembly **100** can be configured as a portable, disposable cooler, which can carry ice. In other embodiments, the assembly **100** can be configured to be recyclable and/or combustible (e.g., for incineration). For example, the top and bottom members **110** and **130** and surface member **135**, including the sidewalls **140** can be made from a biodegradable corn resin, and the strut **150** can be made from a metallic material treated with a rust accelerant so that the assembly **100** will breakdown or disinte-

8

grate in a landfill relatively quickly. In other embodiments, various portions of the assembly **100** can be made from recyclable materials such as metal, plastic, and the like.

FIG. **6** is an isometric illustration of the deployable container assembly **100** of FIG. **1** with a closure device **120** shown covering the top member **110** of the assembly **100** and the opening **112** in the top member. In FIG. **6**, the closure device **120** is shown in the closed position covering the opening **112** to help retain items within the interior area **103**. The closure device **120** can be moved from the open position and held in closed position by a fastener device **122** (e.g., a drawstring).

The closure device **120** is coupled to at least one of the surface member **135** the top member **110**. In the illustrated embodiment, the closure device **120** includes a flexible skirt portion internally connected to the sidewalls **140** adjacent to the top member **110**. The skirt portion is configured to hang in an open position (shown in FIGS. **1** and **2**) around the exterior of the sidewalls **140** below the top member **110** when the assembly is in the deployed position. The skirt portion can be lifted above the top member and moved to the closed positions by pulling on the drawstring, thereby circling the skirt portion closed and enclosing the top member **110** therein. In certain embodiments, the closure device **120** can be pulled up to cover overflow materials or items that may project through the opening **112** and above the top member **110**. Accordingly, the container assembly **100** can be configured with an intentional overflow capacity while still being able to cleanly and adequately contain the trash or other items placed into and onto the container assembly **100**.

In other embodiments the closure device **120** and/or the fastener device **122** can include other configurations. For example, the closure device **120** can be a flap or door that covers the opening **112** in the top member **110**. The fastener device **122** can include tape, Velcro®, or a twist tie. In still other embodiments, the top member **110**, bottom member **130**, or sidewalls **140** can include an integral closure feature. In selected embodiments, the top member **110** is crushable and can be crushed as the closure device **120** is secured over the assembly **100** to form a compact package when a partially filled assembly **100** is closed in preparation for disposing of the container assembly and its contents as a unit.

In other embodiments, the deployable container assembly **100** can have other configurations. For example, FIG. **7** is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of a top member **710** of a deployable container assembly **700** in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. In FIG. **7**, the top member **710** has an opening **712** that provides access into the interior area. The top member **710** has a plurality of fingers **715** and slots **716** surrounding an opening **712** similar to the fingers, slots, and opening discussed above with reference to FIG. **1**. However, the fingers **715** can be folded or slanted upwardly and radially outwardly away from the opening **712** to an open position. Propping mechanisms **717** can be used to prop or secure the fingers **715** in the open position. The propping mechanisms **717** can be integral with the top member **710** or they can be separate from and/or connectable to the top member. In the deployed position, the fingers **715** are configured to funnel items into the opening **712** and also provide lateral support for any overflow material that extends upwardly beyond the opening **712**. The fingers **715** can also be folded radially inwardly and downwardly toward the opening **712** partially or fully to close the opening. In one embodiment, the fingers **715**

extend toward the center of the opening 712 so that they completely cover the opening 712 when in the stowed position.

FIG. 8 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly 800 with a closure device 820 in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. In FIG. 8, a closure device 820 includes a rigid disk, semi-rigid disk, or membrane configured to be placed over at least a portion of an opening 812 of a top member 810. The closure device 820 can be separable from the top member 810, or it can be securely or integrally attached and positionable over the opening 812. Fastening devices 822 can be used to secure the closure device 820 to the assembly 800. The fastening devices 822 can include tape, Velcro®, tabs, detents, or the like.

FIGS. 9 and 10 are partially schematic illustrations of a deployable container assembly 900 with a closure device 920 positionable adjacent to an opening in the top member 110 in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. In FIG. 9, the top member 910 of the assembly 900 includes two fastening devices 922 in the form of foldable flanges extending vertically away from the top member 910. The closure device 920 (e.g., a disk or membrane) is positioned proximate to at least a portion of an opening 912 in the top member 910, and the flanges are folded over the closure device 920 to releasably securing it in place. In other embodiments, the flanges can be connected to other portions of the assembly 900, for example, to a portion of the sidewalls 940. In still other embodiments, the fastening devices 922 can have other configurations. For example, in certain embodiments the fastening devices 922 can include a foldable or crushable lip that extends around and engage at least a portion of the top member 910, which can be used to secure the closure member 920 in place over the opening 912 in the top member.

FIG. 11-14 are partially schematic illustrations of a top member 1110 of a collapsible container assembly that includes a closure feature in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. In the illustrated embodiment, the top member 1110 is movable between an open and a closed position.

The top member 1110 includes curved fingers 1115 separated by slots 1116. In the closed position, the fingers 1115 can at least partially overlap with one another to form a generally continuous surface. The top member can be moved from the closed position to the open position by applying a force proximate to a selected point P (shown in FIG. 11). As the top member moves from the closed position to the open position, distal ends of the fingers 1115 move downwardly and radially outwardly (as shown in FIGS. 13 and 14, which is a cross-sectional side elevation view of the top member 1110 shown in FIG. 13), thereby creating an opening 1112 in the top member 1110 to provide access into the assembly's interior area. In certain embodiments, the fingers 1115 can have a memory characteristic so that they automatically return to the closed position when the force is released.

FIG. 15 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly 1500 with a slanted top member 1510 coupled to the sidewalls 1540 in accordance with yet another embodiment of the invention. FIG. 16 is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of a portion of the deployable container assembly shown in FIG. 15. In the illustrated embodiment, the top member 1510 includes an opening 1512 that provides access into the assembly's interior area 1503. The top member 1510 and the opening 1512 are oriented at a non-perpendicular angle relative to a longitudinal axis L of the container assembly 1500 that extends

through the interior area in the illustrated embodiment. Accordingly, the top member 1510 and its opening 1512 are oriented at an angle relative to the sidewalls 1540 when the container assembly 1500 is in the deployed position. The slanted top member 1510 can be particularly useful when the assembly 1500 (in the deployed position) is used in an area where space above the container assembly 1500 is limited or restricted. For example, if the container assembly 1500 is used as a disposable, under-counter trash receptacle, the opening 1512 is better accessible from the side of the deployed container assembly.

In the illustrated embodiment, the top member 1510 is a generally planar member made of plastic, cardboard, wood, paper, or other fairly stiff material that will hold its shape and that will hold the upper portion of the sidewalls 1540 in an open position that provides substantially unobstructed access into the interior area 1503 when the assembly 1500 is in the deployed position. The top member 1510 is securely attached to the sidewalls 1540 around the top member's perimeter. In the illustrated embodiments, the entire top member is oriented at a non-perpendicular angle relative to the longitudinal axis L. In another embodiment, the top member can have a flat portion (i.e., generally perpendicular to the longitudinal axis) and a sloped section (i.e., non-perpendicular to the longitudinal axis) connected to the flat section. The opening 1512 can be formed in just the sloped section, or the opening can be formed in both the slanted section and the flat section. In another embodiment, multiple openings 1512 can be provided in the top member 1510.

The container assembly 1500 of the illustrated embodiment includes three bendable or collapsible struts 1550, generally similar to the support members discussed above with reference to FIGS. 1-6. At least one of the struts 1550 is longer than the other struts such that, when the container assembly 1500 is moved from the collapsed position to the deployed position, the top member 1510 will automatically be oriented in the slanted configuration. In other embodiments, the assembly 1500 can have more or fewer struts 1550 with the different lengths as needed to support the top member 1510 in the slanted configuration when in the deployed position.

In the illustrated embodiment, the top panel 1510 includes a closure device 1520 positionable to cover the opening 1512. In one embodiment, the closure device 1520 is a rotating panel, pivotally coupled to the top member 1510 by two fastening devices 1522 that define an axis of rotation of the panel. The rotating panel is configured so that when a force is applied to the panel at a point away from the axis of rotation, the panel rotates relative to the opening 1512 so as to uncover at least a portion of the opening 1512. In selected embodiments, the panel can be balanced so that, when the force is removed, the panel automatically returns to a closed position so that the panel substantially covers the opening 1512.

In other embodiments, the closure device 1520 can include a detent to hold the closure device in any of an open position, a closed position, or an intermediate position. In still other embodiments, the closure device 1520 can include a friction device that resists or restricts movement of the closure device, thereby causing the closure device to remain in a selected position unless an external force is applied to it. When the closure device 1520 is in the closed position the entire container assembly 1500 and its contents can be easily and cleanly thrown away, recycled, or otherwise disposed of as a unit.

FIG. 17 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly 1700 of another embodiment having a

11

construction generally similar to the embodiments described above. In addition, the sidewalls **1740** includes a printed marking **1741** and/or a labeling area **1742**. The printed marking **1741** can include text, images, designs, indicia symbols, logos, or other markings. In one embodiment, the printed marking **1741** includes information (e.g., text and/or images) associated with an intended designated use of the assembly **1700**. In another embodiment, the markings **1741** can include advertising and/or a decorative design (e.g., a seasonal decoration scheme). The sidewalls **1740** can be constructed of a flexible material, such as plastic, paper, or the like onto which the markings **1741** can be directly printed or applied thereto. In another embodiment, the container assembly **1700** can have transparent or translucent pouches connected to the sidewalls **1740** or other locations. The pouches are configured to removably receive inserts so the inserts are visible from the exterior of the assembly. The pouches can receive custom printed inserts with text, designs, logos or other indicia thereon. For example, an insert can be customized for a particular event at which the container assembly would be used, or the insert can be provided with a message or image related to the event. Other inserts or indicia devices could be used with the pouches in other embodiments.

The labeling area **1742** can include a portion of the assembly **1700** configured for labeling by the consumer. For example, the labeling area **1742** can include an area of the sidewall **1740** configured to receive preprinted labels and/or an area configured to be written on with an indelible marker or the like. Although the printed design **1741** and the labeling area **1742** are shown positioned on the sidewalls **1740**, in other embodiments the printed designs **1741** and the labeling areas **1742** can be located on any portion of the disposable, deployable container assembly **1700**.

FIG. **18** is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly **1800** with handling devices **1870**, securing devices **1875**, and storage devices **1880** in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. In the illustrated embodiment, the container assembly **1800** has only a single strut **1850** extending between a top member **1810** and a bottom member **1830**. Other embodiments can have multiple struts **1850** extending between the top and bottom members **1810** and **1830**. The flexible sidewalls **1840** also extend between the top and bottom member **1810** and **1830** creating an enclosure with an interior area **1803** into which items can be placed. In FIG. **18**, the strut **1850** is similar to the support members discussed above with reference to FIGS. **4** and **5**. FIG. **19** is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of a portion of the deployable container assembly **1800** of FIG. **18** shown in a collapsed position. In the illustrated embodiment, the sidewalls **1840** have been removed for the purposes of clarity and illustration. In FIG. **19**, the single strut **1850** has been bent or folded as the top member **1810** and the bottom member **1830** are moved toward one another.

In the illustrated embodiment in FIG. **18**, the sidewall **1840** includes the opening **1844** that provides access into the interior area **1803**. In other embodiments, the opening **1844** can be in the top member **1810**. The container assembly **1800** can also include a closure device **1820** that movably covers the opening **1844** similar to the closure devices described above. The handling devices **1870** of the illustrated embodiment, shown as first and second handles **1870a** and **1870b**, are securely connected to the sidewalls **1840** of the container assembly **1800**. The handling devices **1870** are sized and configured so a user can grip the handles to lift or otherwise move and position the entire container assembly

12

1800 and its contents, if any. For example, the second handles **1870b** are attached to the sidewalls **1840** on opposite sides of the container assembly **1800**. In one embodiment, the handling devices **1870** are configured to removably receive an automated device or machine (e.g., a forklift) that can engage and lift or move the container assembly.

The first handling device **1870a** can also be used to secure or hold the assembly **1800** in a selected position. For instance, in one embodiment the assembly **1800** is sized and configured to hang from a headrest or other portion of an automobile seat and extend downwardly along the back of the automobile seat. The assembly **1800**, when in the deployed position, can receive trash, debris, or other items while hanging on the automobile seat. The disposable assembly **1800** and its contents can then be removed from the automobile as a unit and thrown away, recycled, etc. In other embodiments, the handling devices **1870** can have other arrangements, can be coupled to other portions of the assembly **1800**, and/or can have other uses.

In the illustrated embodiment, the assembly **1800** has the storage devices **1880** coupled to the sidewalls **1840** adjacent to the bottom member **1830**. The storage devices **1880** are configured to receive and hold various items. For example, the storage devices **1880** can be configured to removably receive weights to serve as ballast to increase the stability of the assembly **1800** when in the deployed position. As an example, the storage devices **1880** can be configured to receive a weighted object, such as a soda can fill with fluid, sand or the like. In other embodiments, the storage devices **1880** can have other configurations and/or be coupled to other portions of the assembly **1800**. In one embodiment, ballast material **1834** is also coupled to the bottom member **1830** to increase the stability of the assembly **1800**. In one embodiment, the ballast material is a heavy ring connected to the bottom member. The ring can be solid, or it can be hollow and filled with water, sand, or other selected ballast material. In other embodiments, the ballast material **1834** can have other arrangements and/or can be coupled to other portions of the assembly **1800**.

FIG. **18** also has the securing devices **1875** coupled to the sidewalls adjacent to the bottom member **1830**. The securing devices are configured to allow a user to secure the assembly **1800** in a specific location and/or orientation. In the illustrated embodiment, the securing devices **1875** include tabs with eyelets or holes. A stake **1876** can be driven through the holes into the ground to hold the securing devices, and thus the assembly **1800**, to the ground. In other embodiments, the securing devices **1875** can have other arrangements and/or be coupled to other portions of the assembly **1800**.

FIG. **20** is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly **2000** with an intermediate support member **2060** in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. In the illustrated embodiments, first struts **2050a** extend between the top member **2010** and the intermediate support member **2060**. Second struts **2050b** extend between the intermediate support member **2060** and the bottom member **2030**. Sidewalls **2040** are positioned relative to the first and second struts **2050a** and **2050b** to form an enclosure. In the illustrated embodiment, the first and second struts **2050a** and **2050b** are similar to the support members discussed above with reference to FIGS. **4** and **5**. The intermediate support member **2060** includes a stiff, substantially non-bendable support member configured to act as an additional structural component for the assembly **2000**. For example, in FIG. **20** the intermediate support member **2060** provides a solid ring or other support for interfacing between the first and second struts **2050a** and **2050b**.

13

FIG. 21 is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of a portion of the deployable container assembly 2000 of FIG. 20 shown in a collapsed position. In FIG. 21, the sidewalls 2040 are not shown for the purpose of clarity and illustration. As the assembly 2000 is moved to the collapsed position, the first struts 2050a are folded between the top member 2010 and the intermediate support member 2060. Similarly, the second struts 2050b are folded between the intermediate support member 2060 and the bottom member 2030. In certain embodiments, the intermediate support member can add strength and/or rigidity to the assembly 2000. In other embodiments, the intermediate support member 2060 can have some flexibility so that the assembly 2000 can have a selected collapsed and/or deployed shape or profile.

FIG. 22 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly 2200 with a closure device 2220 in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. The assembly 2200 includes an intermediate support member 2260 that extends between the top member 2210 and the bottom member 2230. In the illustrated embodiment, the intermediate support member 2260 forms a substantially rigid or semi-rigid back wall positioned generally opposite a strut 2250, which is similar to the support member discussed above. The back wall provides vertical and lateral support to the assembly 2000 that works in conjunction with the support and stability of the strut 2250. The sidewalls 2040 are positioned around the intermediate support member 2060 and the strut 2050 to form an enclosure having an interior area 2203 configured to receive items when the assembly 2200 is in the deployed position. The top member 2210 includes an opening 2212 that provides access to the interior area 2203. In the illustrated embodiment, the opening 2212 is coverable by a closure device 2220 coupled to a biasing mechanism 2224. In FIG. 22, the closure device 2220 is shown in the closed position.

FIG. 23 is a partially schematic side elevation of a portion of the deployable container assembly 2200 of FIG. 22 with the closure device 2220 in an open position. In FIG. 23, the biasing mechanism 2224 is coupled to the closure device 2220 and the auxiliary support member 2260. The biasing mechanism 2224 includes an elongated flexible member with a concave portion, similar to the shape of the struts discussed above with reference to FIGS. 4 and 5. When the closure device 2220 is in the closed position (FIG. 22), the biasing mechanism 2224 is partially folded (e.g., in a folded position) and part of the concave portion of the biasing mechanism 2224 is generally flattened (similar to the struts shown in FIG. 5). In selected embodiments, the flattened portion allows the closure device 2220 to remain the closed position and/or resists movement toward the open position. When the closure device 2220 is in the open position, the concave portion of the biasing mechanism 2224 is not flattened (e.g., in an extended position similar to the support member shown in FIG. 4). In this extended position, the biasing mechanism 2224 can resist movement of the closure device 2220 toward the closed position and/or movement away from the open position.

In selected embodiments, the biasing mechanism 2224 can hold the closure device 2220 in the open position while the interior area 2203 of the assembly 2200 is being accessed and can hold the closure device in the closed position after the interior area 2203 has been accessed. In other embodiments the biasing mechanism 2224 can have other arrangements. For example, the biasing mechanism 2224 can be coupled between the closure device 2220 and other portions of the assembly (e.g., a portion of a foldable support

14

member). In still other embodiments the biasing mechanism 2224 can include other devices (e.g., a spring device and/or a detent arrangement) that work with the closure device 2220 to hold it open or closed as desired.

FIG. 24 is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of a portion of the deployable container assembly 2200 of FIG. 22 shown in a collapsed position. As shown in the illustrated embodiment, the intermediate support member 2260 can be hinged relative to the top and bottom surface members 2210 and 2230 (e.g., via tape, a flexible material, or a multi-piece hinge). As the assembly 2200 is collapsed, the bendable struts 2250 can be folded in multiple locations as portions of the top and bottom surface members 2210 and 2230 are rotated toward one another.

FIG. 25 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly 2500 with at least one external support member 2250 in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. In FIG. 25, the assembly 2500 includes a first end member 2510 laterally disposed from a second end member 2530 with sidewalls 2540 extending there between to form an enclosure with an interior area 2503 and an exterior 2502. Two foldable struts 2250 extend diagonally between the end members 2210 and 2230 and are located on the exterior 2502 of the assembly 2500.

FIG. 26 is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of a portion of the deployable container assembly 2500 of FIG. 25 shown in a collapsed position. In the illustrated embodiment, when moving the assembly 2500 from a deployed position to a collapsed position, the struts 2550 are folded in multiple locations and remain on the exterior of the assembly 2500. In selected embodiments, the struts 2550 can be removed from the end members 2510, and 2530 and sidewalls. For example, struts 2550 can be removed after the assembly's interior area 2503 has been filled or partially filled with items, such as trash, and the filled assembly (except for the struts) can be thrown away or recycled as a unit.

The assembly 2500 in FIG. 26 also includes a removable stowing device 2562, such as a clamp or clip, that engages and holds the assembly 2500 in the collapsed position. In certain embodiments, the assembly 2500 can automatically move the deployed position when the stowing device 2562 is removed. In other embodiments, a user must begin to move the assembly 2500 from the collapsed position toward the deployed position after removing the stowing device 2562, and after moving past an intermediate position, the assembly will automatically move to the fully deployed position. In other embodiments, the stowing device 2562 is configured to store the assembly in the collapsed position and to protect it from inadvertently moving toward the deployed position, such as during shipping or storage. The stowing device 2562 can have other arrangements (e.g., the stowing device can include tape or shrink wrap) in other embodiments.

FIG. 27 is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly 2700 with a double sidewall 2740 configuration with an inner sidewall 2740b and an outer sidewall 2740a. In the illustrated embodiment, the assembly 2700 includes foldable struts 2750 extending between a top member 2710 and a bottom member 2730. The top member 2710 includes a rigid or semi-rigid disk with an opening 2712 therein. An outer sidewall 2740a extends between an outer portion of the top member 2710 and the bottom member 2730. The inner sidewall 2740b extends downwardly from an inner portion of the top member 2710 and is closed at the bottom forming a cavity or second interior 2703b that can be accessed through the opening 2712. In the illustrated

15

embodiment, the struts **2750** are positioned in a first interior **2703a** between the inner sidewall **2740b** and the outer sidewall **2740a**. The struts **2750** are similar to the struts discussed above with reference to FIGS. **4** and **5** and can be folded to move the assembly **2700** between the deployed position to a collapsed position.

In certain embodiments, the assembly **2700** can include a porous inner sidewall and a water resistant outer sidewall. The assembly can be used as a collapsible and/or disposable container that allows for fluid drainage through the inner sidewalls **2740b**. The outer sidewall **2740a** can be used to add additional integrity to the assembly **2700** in case the inner sidewall **2740b** is punctured. In still other embodiments, the inner sidewall **2740b** can deform as items are added to the interior area, while the outer sidewall **2740a** retains a substantially fixed shape in the deployed position (e.g., so that the assembly **2500** can fit into a selected space and/or can retain an aesthetically pleasing shape). In yet other embodiments, insulating material can be placed between the inner and outer sidewalls **2740b** and **2740a** (e.g., when the assembly **2700** is used as a cooler). In other embodiments, the struts **2750** can be positioned inside the inner sidewall **2740b** and/or outside of the outer sidewall **2740a**.

FIG. **28** is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly **2800** without a bottom member in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. In one embodiment, the assembly **2800** could use a ring as the bottom member **2830** so that the sidewalls **2840** are supported, and the end of the assembly is open. In FIG. **28**, the assembly **2800** includes a top member **2810** and foldable struts **2850** extending away from the top member **2810** and configured to support a top member **2840**. In one embodiment, the top member **2810** is a generally planar member without an opening therein. The struts **2850** are similar to the support member discussed above with reference to FIGS. **4** and **5**. Accordingly, the assembly **2800** can be collapsed by folding the struts **2850** and the sidewalls **2840** relative to the top member. In the illustrated embodiment, the assembly **2800** can be used as a collapsible cover for items. For example, the assembly **2800** could be used as a frost cover for plants.

FIG. **29** is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly **2900** with a hinge device coupled to at least one support member **2950** in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. The assembly **2900** includes two foldable support members **2950**, shown as a first foldable support member **2950a** and a second foldable support member **2950b**. The foldable support members **2950** extend between the top member **2910** and the bottom member **2930**. A sidewall **2940** is coupled to the top and bottom members **2910** and **2930** and extend around the support members **2950** to form an enclosure when the assembly **2900** is in the deployed position.

FIG. **30** is a partially schematic cross-sectional illustration of a portion of the deployable container assembly **2900** of FIG. **29** shown in a collapsed position with the sidewalls **2940** removed for the purpose of clarity and illustration. As the assembly **2900** collapses, the first support member **2950a** folds in a first direction relative to the top member **2910** and the second support member **2950b** folds in a second direction at least approximately perpendicular to the first direction. In addition to folding, the first and second support members **2950a** and **2950b** are pivotally connected to the top and bottom members **2910** and **2930**. Accordingly, as the support members **2950** fold, the hinges also allow

16

portions of the support members **2950** to pivot relative to the top and bottom members **2910** and **2930**.

FIG. **31** is a partially schematic illustration of the top member **2910** of the deployable container assembly **2900** of FIG. **29**. A first part **2955a** of the first support member **2950a** is coupled to the top member **2910** via a hinge device **2953** and a first part **2955b** of the second support member **2950b** is coupled to the top member **2910** via another hinge device **2953**. Accordingly, the hinge devices **2953** allow the support members **2950** to pivot relative to at least the top members **2910** when the assembly **2900** moves between the collapsed and deployed positions. In the illustrated embodiment, the hinge devices **2953** include a flexible adhesive member (e.g., a piece of high strength tape). In other embodiments, the hinge devices **2953** can include more complex devices (e.g., a multiple piece mechanical hinge) and/or hinge devices **2953** that allows movement in one or multiple axes.

FIG. **32** is a partially schematic illustration of the bottom member **2930** of the collapsible container assembly **2900** of FIG. **29**. A second part **2956a** of the first support member **2950a** is coupled to the bottom member **2930** via a hinge device **2953** and a second part **2956b** of the second support member **2950b** is coupled to the bottom member **2930** via another hinge device **2953**. As discussed in further detail below, when the assembly **2900** is fully assembled, the first part **2955a** of the first support member **2950a** is coupled to the second part **2956a** of the first support member **2950a** by a concave strut **2957a** of the first support member **2950a**. Similarly, the first part **2955b** of the second support member **2950b** is coupled to the second part **2956b** of the second support member **2950b** by a concave strut (shown schematically in FIG. **29**) of the second support member **2950b**. The first parts **2955a/2956a** and the second parts **2955b/2956b** can be made of a substantially stiff material, such as cardboard, plastic, wood, metal, composite, or other sufficiently stiff materials.

FIG. **33** is a partially schematic illustration of the first support member **2950a** of the deployable container assembly **2900** of FIG. **29**. In FIG. **33**, the concave strut **2957a** of the first support member **2950a** is shown coupled to the first part **2955a** and the second part **2956a** of the first support member **2950a**. In the illustrated embodiment, the concave strut **2957a** is coupled to the first part **2955a** and the second part **2956a** by one or more fasteners **2958**. In selected embodiments, the fasteners **2958** can include tape, adhesive, clips, rivets, screws, bolts, and the like. The concave strut **2957a** includes a concave portion or concave cross-section and folds/operates similarly to the struts discussed above with reference to FIGS. **4** and **5**. Accordingly, the first support member **2950a** can be folded across a portion of the concave strut **2957a** as the assembly **2900** is moved to the collapsed position. In the unfolded position, the concave strut **2957a** aligns with the first and second parts of the support member (i.e. generally co-planar), so that the support member can resist vertical loads applied to the top and/or bottom members **2910** and **2930**, so that the assembly **2900** will remain in the deployed position.

In one embodiment, the fasteners **2958** can be integral with the concave part **2957a**, the first part **2955a**, and/or the second part **2956a**. In other embodiments, the concave part **2957a** can be inserted into pockets in the first and second parts **2955a** and **2956a**. In a selected embodiment, the concave part **2957a** and the pockets can include a detent feature to provide a secure connection.

FIG. **34** is a partially schematic illustration of a first surface member **3440** of a deployable container assembly **3400** with at least a portion of a support member **3450**

17

integral to the sidewall **3440** in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. In FIG. **34**, the assembly **3400** includes at least one strut structure having a first portion **3455** and a second portion **3456**. The first portion **3455** and/or second portion **3456** can be integral with the sidewalls **3440**. For example, the sidewalls **3440** can be made of a plastic material, and the first and second portions **3455** and **3456** can be integrally formed in the same plastic material via a melt phase process. In other embodiments, the first and second portions **3455** and **3456** can be formed from other material and/or by other processes.

In the illustrated embodiment, a strut portion **3457** of the support member **3450** is coupled to the first and second portions **3455** and **3456** via fasteners **3458**. In FIG. **34**, the fasteners **3458** include grooves formed in the first and second portions **3455** and **3456** and the strut portion **3457** is inserted into the grooves and retained in the grooves via friction. In other embodiments, the fasteners **3458** can have other arrangements. As discussed above, in the illustrated embodiment, the strut portion **3457** has a concave cross-section and folds/operates similarly to the struts discussed above with reference to FIGS. **4** and **5**. Accordingly, the support member **3450** can have a collapsed position where the strut portion **3457** is folded and a deployed position where the concave portion **3457** is at least approximately unfolded. In one embodiment, the strut portion **3457** is made of thin metal, plastic or other suitable material without a significant memory for the folded position, as discussed above. In another embodiment, the strut portion **3457** is a distinct portion but is integrally connected to the first and second portions **3455** and **3456**.

In one embodiment, the support member **3450** includes a layer of sound insulation **3454** coupled to the concave portion **3457** to reduce any noise made by the concave portion **3457** of the support member **3450** as it is folded and unfolded. In the illustrated embodiment, the layer of sound insulation **3454** is a tape material, although in other embodiments the sound insulation **3454** can have other configurations, such as spray on coating.

FIG. **35** is an isometric illustration of a strut **3550** of a deployable container assembly in accordance with still another embodiment of the invention. In FIG. **35**, the strut **3550** includes multiple concave portions **3551** with concave cross-sections, shown as a first concave portion **3551a** and a second concave portion **3551b**. The strut **3550** in FIG. **35** folds or operates similar to the strut shown in FIGS. **4** and **5**. Accordingly, the first and second concave portions **3551a** and **3551b** can support vertical loads and resist bending or folding as long as the concave cross-sections remain substantially undisturbed. However, once a threshold force is exceeded, a portion of the concave cross-section flattens out and allows the strut **3550** to fold. Once the strut **3550** is unfolded and the concave cross-sections return, the strut **3550** will again support vertical loads and resist bending.

The strut **3550** shown in FIG. **35** can have other arrangements. For example, FIG. **36** illustrates another strut **3650** with multiple concave sections **3651**. In FIG. **36**, the strut **3650** includes multiple concave portions **3651** with concave cross-sections, shown as a first concave portion **3651a** and a second concave portion **3651b** positioned side by side. The strut **3650** folds or operates similar to the strut shown in FIGS. **4** and **5**. Accordingly, the first and second concave portions **3651a** and **3651b** will support vertical loads and resist bending or folding as long as the concave cross-sections remain undisturbed. However, once a threshold force is exceeded, a portion of the concave cross-section flattens out and allows the strut **3650** to fold. Once the strut

18

3650 is unfolded and the concave cross-sections return, the strut **3550** will again support vertical loads and resist bending. In other embodiments, the support member **3650** can have more or fewer concave portions.

FIG. **37** is an isometric illustration of a deployable container assembly **3700** with multiple compartments in accordance with still another embodiment of the invention. The assembly in FIG. **37** includes strut **3750** extending between a top member **3710** and a bottom member **3730**. The top and bottom members **3710** and **3730** carry an outer sidewall **3740a** and/or an inner sidewall **3740b**. The outer sidewall **3740a** forms an exterior surface of the assembly **3700**. The inner sidewall **3740b** forms a divider wall within the assembly. The divider can be positioned to segregate the interior of the assembly **3700** into multiple compartments. For example, in certain embodiments one compartment can be used as a disposable cooler and the other compartment can be used as a disposable trash container. In other embodiments, the assembly **3700** can have more or fewer compartments.

FIG. **38** is an isometric illustration of a first deployable container assembly **3800a** coupled to a second deployable container assembly **3800b** in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. In FIG. **38**, the first and second assemblies **3800a** and **3800b** include deployable containers in accordance with one or more of the various embodiments described above. The first and second assemblies **3800a** and **3800b** are coupled together via one or more securing devices **3875**. In the illustrated embodiment, the securing devices **3875** include tape or Velcro®, although other embodiments can have the securing devices **3875** with other arrangements. For example, in selected embodiments the securing device **3875** can include straps that extend around portions of each of the assemblies **3800a** and **3800b**.

FIG. **39** is an isometric illustration of a packaged assembly **3995** that includes a packaging device **3985** with at least one deployable container assembly **3900** in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. In FIG. **39**, the packaging device **3985** is configured to carry multiple assemblies **3900**, shown as a first container assembly **3900a** and a second container assembly **3900b**, both in the collapsed configuration. In the illustrated embodiment, the packaging device **3985** is configured to be self supporting so that it can hold and dispense the multiple assemblies **3900** as needed. The packaging device **3985** of the illustrated embodiment is configured to be loaded with the multiple container assemblies **3900**, shipped as a unit, and used as a storage device for use by an end user. The packaging device can also be used as a display and dispensing device at a point of sale location. In selected embodiments, the packaging device **3985** can include one or more restraint devices **3986** configured to releasably restrain each of the assemblies **3900** in the packaging device **3985** until the packaged assembly **3995** is sold and/or until each of the assemblies **3900** have been dispensed.

In other embodiments the packaged assembly can have other arrangements. For example, in other embodiments the restraint device(s) **3986** can include a holding rack and a wrapping material, such as shrink wrap extending around the holding rack and the assemblies **3900**. The shrink wrap can be removed and the assemblies dispensed directly from the holding rack. In other embodiments, the packaging device **3985** can have other configurations and/or can carry more or fewer assemblies **3900**.

A feature of some of the embodiments discussed above is that a deployable container assembly can be easy to store and convenient to use. Additionally, in certain embodiments

19

the container assemblies can be disposable, recyclable, and/or biodegradable. Various uses for bins in accordance with embodiments of the invention can include a trash bin, a recycling bin, a laundry bin, a dry cleaning bin, a storage bin, a cooler, a flower/plant pot, a cover to protect plants from frost (e.g., a bin without a bottom). As noted above, the bin can have multiple cavities so that it can be used for multiple purposes. For example, a bin having three cavities can be used as a combination cooler, garbage bin, and recycle bin.

From the foregoing, it will be appreciated that specific embodiments of the invention have been described herein for purposes of illustration, but that various modifications may be made without deviating from the invention. Additionally, aspects of the invention described in the context of particular embodiments may be combined or eliminated in other embodiments. Furthermore, while advantages associated with certain embodiments of the invention have been described in the context of those embodiments, other embodiments may also exhibit such advantages, and not all embodiments need necessarily exhibit such advantages to fall within the scope of the invention. Accordingly, the invention is not limited except as by the appended claims.

We claim:

1. A collapsible assembly, comprising:

a frame comprising a base, a top member and a pair of monolithic support members spaced apart from each other and extending between the base and the top member, each support member having a middle portion extending between a top end coupled to the top member and a bottom end coupled to the base, each support member being movable between an extended position and a folded position thereby allowing the middle portion to bend through a range of at least 90 degrees, each support member in the extended position being substantially vertical throughout and having an arcuate cross-sectional shape configured to resist axial loads and bending at the middle portion until a threshold force is exceeded, each support member in the folded position being substantially bent along the middle portion to create a flattened profile at the middle;

a collapsible, flexible enclosure connected to the frame, the enclosure having a closed bottom portion, an open top portion and a circumferential sidewall extending between the top portion and the bottom portion, wherein the top member of the frame is adjacent to the open top portion of the enclosure;

the collapsible assembly having a deployed configuration with the top member spaced apart from the base and the frame free-standing with each support members in the extended position; and

the collapsible assembly having a collapsed configuration with the support members in the folded position and the top member disposed directly adjacent to the base.

2. The collapsible assembly of claim 1, further comprising a closure device coupled to the enclosure, the closure device being movable between open and closed positions, in the closed position the closure device closing the open top portion of the enclosure.

3. The collapsible assembly of claim 1 wherein the support members include a metallic material treated with a rust accelerant.

4. The collapsible assembly of claim 1 wherein the top member is an annular top member is spaced above the base.

5. A collapsible waste container assembly, comprising: a flexible enclosure connected to a collapsible frame, the enclosure having a closed bottom portion, an open top

20

portion and a circumferential sidewall extending between the open top portion and the closed bottom portion, thereby defining an interior area;

a collapsible, internal frame disposed within the interior area of the enclosure comprising a pair of foldable monolithic support members spaced apart from each other and extending continuously between a top end and a bottom end, each support member having a middle portion extending between the top end and the bottom end, wherein the top end of each support member is connected to the open top portion of the enclosure, and the bottom end of each support member is connected to the closed bottom portion of the enclosure;

a deployed assembly configuration where the internal frame is free-standing and the pair of support members is deployed in a substantially straight, unfolded arrangement, and each support member has an arcuate concave cross-sectional shape enabling axial load support and bending resistance until a threshold force is exceeded, and the open top portion is spaced apart from the closed bottom portion and the circumferential sidewall extends adjacent to the pair of support members, and the open top portion of the enclosure provides access into the interior area of the enclosure; and

a collapsed assembly configuration where the internal frame is collapsed and the pair of support members is in a folded arrangement, each support member folded at the middle portion of each support member and having a flattened profile at the middle portion different from the arcuate, concave cross-sectional shape of each support member in the deployed assembly configuration, and the pair of support members biases away from the collapsed assembly configuration, and wherein the open top portion is directly adjacent to the closed bottom portion and the circumferential sidewall is collapsed therebetween in the collapsed assembly configuration.

6. The collapsible waste container assembly of claim 5 wherein the internal frame has a first end member and a second end member each connected to the pair of support members, and the first end member spaced apart from the second end member when the assembly is in the deployed assembly configuration.

7. The collapsible waste container assembly of claim 5 wherein the internal frame has an annular top member and a base each connected to the pair of support members, and the annular top member spaced apart from the base with the pair of support members extending therebetween when the assembly is in the deployed assembly configuration.

8. The collapsible waste container assembly of claim 7 wherein the annular top member has a top planar surface substantially parallel and adjacent to a bottom planar surface of the base when the assembly is in the collapsed assembly configuration.

9. The collapsible waste container assembly of claim 5 wherein the flexible enclosure is made of a liquid impervious material.

10. The collapsible waste container assembly of claim 5, the frame further comprising:

a substantially stiff, planar top ring connected to the enclosure adjacent to the open top portion of the enclosure, the top ring including an opening that provides access to the interior area of the enclosure when the assembly is in the deployed assembly configuration;

21

a substantially stiff, planar base connected to the closed bottom portion of the enclosure and being parallel with the top ring when the assembly is in the deployed assembly configuration and when the assembly is in the collapsed assembly configuration.

11. The collapsible waste container assembly of claim 5, further comprising a stowing device configured to be coupled to the assembly when the assembly is in the collapsed assembly configuration and to retain the assembly in a collapsed position.

12. The collapsible waste container assembly of claim 5 wherein the open top portion of the enclosure and the closed bottom portion of the enclosure are integrally connected to the circumferential sidewall of the enclosure.

13. The collapsible waste container assembly of claim 5 wherein the internal frame further comprises a planar top ring connected to each top end of each support member and a planar base connected to each bottom end of each support member.

14. A method of using a collapsible waste container assembly, the method comprising:

engaging the waste container assembly in a collapsed configuration, the waste container assembly having a frame with a base, a top member, and a pair of spaced apart monolithic support members extending continuously between the base and the top member, each support member having a middle portion extending between a top end and a bottom end, and a collapsible enclosure connected to the frame and having a closed bottom portion, an open top portion, and a circumferential sidewall extending continuously between the closed bottom portion and the open top portion, where the top member is connected to the open top portion of the enclosure, and the base is connected to the closed bottom portion of the enclosure;

22

wherein, when the waste container assembly is in the collapsed configuration, the frame is in a folded arrangement with each support member being folded at each middle portion with each top end adjacent to each bottom end, and each support member having a flattened profile at each middle portion, and wherein the annular top member is adjacent to the base and the circumferential sidewall is collapsed between the annular top member and the base; and

deploying the waste container assembly from the collapsed configuration to a deployed configuration wherein the frame is free-standing and the pair of support members are in a substantially straight, extended and unfolded arrangement, each support member having an arcuate cross-sectional shape enabling each support member to support axial loads and to resist bending at each middle portion until a threshold force is applied, and wherein the top member is spaced apart from the base by the pair of support members with the circumferential sidewall deployed adjacent to the support members between the top member and the base, and wherein the top member defines an opening that provides waste disposal access to an interior defined by the enclosure.

15. The method of using a collapsible waste container assembly of claim 14, further comprising retaining the assembly in the collapsed position with a stowing device.

16. The method of using a collapsible waste container assembly of claim 14, further comprising receiving refuse into the interior of the enclosure through the opening in the top member; and closing the top portion of the enclosure with a closure device to retain the refuse in the interior of the enclosure.

* * * * *